



Books for Giving

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Rosemary Stones picks out some of the best offerings and invites experts in the field to choose something very special to them.

What would you choose to give to a child this Christmas? As bookshop shelves fill up with seasonal titles competing for attention, **Rosemary Stones** picks out some of the best offerings and invites experts in the field to choose something very special to them.<!--break-->

Christmas themes

Two very different picture book takes on the nativity story will command attention this Christmas. In Kevin Crossley-Holland and Peter Malone's [How Many \[3\] Miles to Bethlehem?](#) (Orion Children's Books, 1 84255 277 5, £9.99) the reader is addressed by the different characters in the story as if in a play ('I am Mary, Tight as a drum. Round as the lady moon calling out to me. my baby will be born tonight. Where can I lie down?'). Malone's rich and formal tableaux, reminiscent of Renaissance paintings, add to the sense of theatre. Sally Grindley and Karin Littlewood's **Home for Christmas** (Frances Lincoln, 1 84507 071 2, £10.99) has Christ's birth seen from the point of view of a homeless market boy, for whom the stable is also home. Witness to such extraordinary events, he no longer feels without a family. Littlewood's bold pencil and wash illustrations are full of drama and feeling.

'This is the week when Christmas comes/Let every pudding burst with plums' are the opening lines of Eleanor Farjeon's 'In the Week When Christmas Comes', one of the more traditional poems in Gaby Morgan's richly enjoyable anthology **Christmas Poems** (Macmillan, 0 330 41339 2, £4.99) which includes new poems alongside the classics (from Anon, William Blake, T S Eliot, U A Fanthorpe, Clare Bevan to Jackie Kay and many more). A well designed, small format paperback, this is an ideal stocking filler for anyone from eight upwards, adults included.

Picture books

Two stunning picture books on non-Christmas themes stand out amongst the many gift offerings from publishers. Jan Ormerod's  [\[4\]Lizzie Nonsense](#) (Little Hare, 1 877003 59 X, £9.99) is a lyrically affectionate tribute to her grandmother who was born in 1883 and who, perhaps, lived the kind of life that Lizzie leads, alone in the Australian bush with her mama and baby until papa comes back from selling the sandalwood he has cut. How Lizzie and mama pass the time, playing and imagining, is beautifully told in text and pictures which conjure up the flavour and detail of that demanding way of life. This is, as it were, Peter Carey for under-fives and Jan Ormerod's best work to date.

In David Almond and Stephen Lambert's atmospheric **Kate, The Cat and The Moon** (Hodder Children's Books, 0 340 77386 3, £10.99) Kate awakes and, now a cat herself, journeys with the 'cat from the night' through the starry darkness. The dreamlike quality of text and illustration which work harmoniously together, will leave young readers spellbound.

Novelty items

✘ [5] Maths may not seem very Christmassy but young mathematicians of 5-7 will hugely enjoy Colin Hawkins' rumbustious **Takeaway Monsters** (Mathew Price, 1 84248 131 2, £8.99) and **Adding Animals** (1 84248 130 4, £8.99) with their flaps and pulls which do just what the titles suggest. Hawkins' command of the page and manically entertaining monsters and animals disguise any educational purpose these titles might have consummately.

Story Collections

Ian Beck's **Stories and Songs for Bedtime** (Oxford, 0 19 278198 7, £12.99) contains five fairy tales each illustrated in a style that is unmistakably Beck's yet which pays homage to the style of other times or to other artists. Thus his 'The Emperor and the Nightingale' draws on classical Chinese art, his 'Frog Princess' on Botticelli. Truly exquisite, however, is his 'Beauty and the Beast' in the style of Ingres with a muted palette of greys and cream. No reteller is credited so the texts, I assume, are also Beck's.



Vivian French and Selina Young's **The Story House: 52 new stories to share, one for every week of the year** (Orion Children's Books, 1 85881 645 9, £20) is a large, square, rather heavy book that draws on the agreeable device of Little Ghost coming to stay and demanding stories from Big Ghost. Big Ghost obliges with a great range of tales reflecting the lives of the family who live in the house, their pets, their adventures and so forth. This treasure trove of short, lively tales is well interpreted by Young's friendly, well observed and slightly cartoony illustrations.

Adèle Geras chooses.

✘ [6] **Bing: Bed Time** (0 385 60595 1) and eight other titles, by Ted Dewan, David Fickling Books, £4.99 each

For under 3s

Bing should be better known. He's a black rabbit and a real star. With his sidekick, Flop, he goes through normal toddler routines with enviable élan and a kind of anarchic and joyous insouciance. The toddler I know best, my granddaughter, really adores him. She was given a Bing book for her first birthday and has never looked back. You can join in with a Bing book. Every one is different and yet they have things in common so that each new volume is seized on with happy cries of recognition. The books are a good shape for small hands. They're precisely the right length and everyone can join in the cry of 'It's a Bing Thing!' at the end of the story. Terrifically cool reading-matter for the very youngest children and moreover excellent value. You get a lot of fun, laughter and surprises for under a fiver. Viva Bing!

Adèle Geras's latest book is **Lizzie's Wish** in 'The Historical House' series (see p23).

Tania Earnshaw chooses.

✘ [7] **With Love: a celebration of words and pictures for the very young**, compiled by Wendy Cooling, Orchard Books, 1 84362 414 1, £12.99

For under 3s

Christmas consumerism brings the Scrooge out in me, so around this time of year I begin to look around for the gifts that various charities sell to support their work. With this in mind, I was delighted to discover **With Love**. Wendy Cooling has convinced over 60 children's writers and illustrators to give their work free to this book, with all the royalties going to Bookstart.

She has produced a stunning gift book (complete with its own gift tag), filled with wonderful images, rhymes and stories which will open up a world of reading to babies throughout the country. In her introduction she gives adults some simple tips for reading to very young children while Chris Meade finishes the book with a brief history of Bookstart and its message. Yes it's worthy, but it's also beautiful and will introduce young children to many of the characters they will find later, in bookshops and libraries: Elmer, Blue Kangaroo, Duck and so on. Go on... buy it for all the babies and

toddlers you know, and you'll be immortalised on the gift tag and will be able to spend many happy hours with them reading the book, memorising the verses and ensuring they grow with a love of reading!

Tania Earnshaw is Community Librarian - Early Years, Chatham Library, Kent.

Michael Thorn chooses.

☒ [8]**Belonging** by Jeannie Baker, Walker, 0 7445 9227 5, £10.99

For 5-8 year olds

Belonging is a deeply affecting, wordless picture book about generations and regeneration. Anyone receiving it as a Christmas gift will jump out of bed on Boxing Day intent on taking a fresh look inside its pages eager to spot little illustrative touches they've missed. Identifying these could become a cross-generational game. In the course of thirteen double-page views through a window we follow the life of a girl from birth to motherhood and watch the street scene outside develop from seedy downtown neglect to become a thriving and vibrant urban oasis. Cleverly composed of collage constructions photographed in full colour, each of the views includes oblique clues to the girl's current age, stage of life, and emotional state. A medicine bottle, a note to a friend and table facts scrawled on her hand mark the girl's tenth birthday, while outside the cornerhouse Hot Food bar has turned into a hairdressing salon. An ageless, life-enhancing book, lovingly conceived and executed.

Michael Thorn is publisher of ACHUKA website and Deputy Head of Hawkes Farm Primary School.

Anne Marley chooses.

☒ [9]**The Star of Kazan** by Eva Ibbotson, Macmillan 2004, 1 405 02054 7, £12.99

For 8-10 year olds

A perfect Christmas present for the child who loves a good old-fashioned adventure story. From the first page, Eva Ibbotson grips the reader with her story of Annika, found as a baby in a church high in the mountains and raised by Ellie and Sigrid in the rather eccentric Viennese household of three professors where they are cook and housemaid. Her idyllic childhood seems to be made perfect when her long lost mother appears to reclaim her and take her off to her castle in the cold northern marshes of the German Empire. But inevitably, all is not as it seems.

This is a magical piece of storytelling, which positively luxuriates in the extraordinary twists and turns of the plot. It is populated by larger than life characters of all kinds - good and bad, honourable and devious, spiteful and lovable, and the story culminates in a breathtaking ending where the final treachery is revealed. The ideal book to curl up with after Christmas lunch when everyone else is asleep in front of the TV or playing their latest Game Boy!

Anne Marley is Head of Children's, Youth and Schools Service, Hampshire Library & Information Service.

Alan Gibbons chooses.

☒ [10]**Lines in the Sand: New Writing on War and Peace**, edited by Mary Hoffman and Rhiannon Lassiter, Frances Lincoln, 0 7112 2282 7, £4.99

For 10-14 year olds

My first inclination was to choose one of the first time novels that have impressed me this year: **Inventing Elliot** by Graham Gardner or **Unique** by Alison Allen Gray. When it came right down to it though, there was only one real contender, and that is **Lines in the Sand**. Prompted by the stormclouds of war that were gathering over Iraq, Mary Hoffman and Rhiannon Lassiter circulated the UK's poets, novelists and artists for children. They wanted to rush out an anthology of new writing on war and peace. The result is terrific: thoughtful, provocative, angry and compassionate. Since the book appeared in the UK and the United States it has only become more relevant. So read the book for Christmas. Better still, turn your efforts to ensuring the best seasonal present of all: peace in that troubled country.

Alan Gibbons's latest book is **The Defender** (Orion Children's Books), £4.99.

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